Values that matter: Implications for occupational stress and leadership

Occupational stress researchers study the nature of stressor-strain (S-S) relationships. This work has consistently shown that employees who experience stressful job demands are likely to experience high levels of strain (e.g., Jex, 1998). Another important aspect of this work has been the discovery of variables that change the nature or the direction of S-S relationships (i.e., moderators). Among these moderators are self-esteem (Brockner, 1988), self-efficacy (Jex & Bliese, 1999), and hardiness (Kobasa, 1979). Moderators of S-S relationships underscore the important differences in how people react to and cope with work stressors.

One potential stress moderator that has received very little attention in recent studying S-S relationships is an individual's values. This lack of research is surprising for two reasons. First, organizational culture (e.g., Schein, 1990) and person-organization fit (e.g., Kristof, 1996) researchers have examined the congruence between employees and organizations along many dimensions, to include values. However, the congruence between personal and organizational values as a buffer of work stress has not been studied. Second, values may be more amenable to change than variables such as personality traits that are commonly studied as stress moderators. Personality is widely regarded as a stable disposition (Eysenck, 1998), and typically organizations can do very little about their employees' personalities other than careful selection (Goodstein & Lanyon, 1999). However, values are seen as more transitory and situational (Seligman and Katz, 1996). In fact, organizations routinely conduct values-based orientations in the hopes of transferring organizational values to workers through socialization and cognitive processes.

Measuring values. Although not studied in occupational stress research, there has been research demonstrating how values are linked to organizational outcomes (e.g., vocational

preference, Costa, McCrae, & Holland, 1984; commitment, O'Reily Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991). Researchers generally endorse Rokeach's (1973) definition of values as relatively enduring beliefs that specific modal behaviors are personally or socially preferable to other modal behaviors. In terms of conceptualizing values, Hogan and Hogan (1996) maintain that values convey critical information about motivation that can be measured through asking one about their interests. The argument being that what one would like to do in a given situation provides a great deal of information about what modes of behavior they prefer and value.

Values for military leaders. In military organizations, values are watchwords. Each service has its own set of organizationally espoused values. Unfortunately, organizationally espoused values have very little research validity as demonstrated in a recent study (Thomas, Bliese, and Bullis, 2001). Thomas et al. found that leadership items written to measure the Army core values of loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage lacked construct and criterion-related validity. This leads to the questions of just what are the values that are important for the military and can they moderate stress.

A classic study conducted by McClelland and Burns (1976) looking at how values were related to leadership profiles may shed some light. McClelland and Burns found that the values of power, affiliation, and achievement made up an ideal profile of a leader (i.e., the Leader Motive Profile). Thomas, Dickson, and Bliese (2001) further tested the power and affiliation as individual values in a study conducted at a military assessment center. They found that both power and affiliation were related to positive leadership ratings. The present study extends the findings of this research by testing power and affiliation as stress moderators in a military assessment center.

Method

Data were collected at two time points from 1,795 ROTC cadets completing a six-week assessment center prior to being commissioned as Officers in the Army. *Power* and *affiliation* values (Smith, Grojean, & Dickson, 2000) were assessed during the first week. Stressors were assessed using *quantitative overload* (Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins & Klesh, 1983) and *qualitative overload* (Thomas & Jex, 2000). Strains assessed included *depression* (Mirowsky, 1996) and morale (WRAIR, 1998). Both stressors and strains were assessed during the fourth week of the assessment center.

Results

Moderated regression analyses revealed that three of the possible eight relationships in which power or affiliation could moderate stress were statistically significant. Moreover, the forms of these interactions were consistent with the buffering effects of values. That is, under conditions of high stress, values of power and affiliation attenuated stressor effects on depression and morale (see Figures 1a-1c).

Discussion

The results of this study are encouraging because they suggest that values can form the basis of selection and training designed to identify, groom, and mentor junior members. In the present study, cadets that performed better and experienced less role stress had value "profiles" congruent with the Leader Motive Profile. In terms of selection, broader-based values such as these may be good discriminators as to who may or may not be as vulnerable to the ill effects of stress. Organizationally specific values can be secondarily shaped and trained (e.g., LDRSHIP in the Army's case). Demonstrating that broad-based values buffers stress indicates that selection strategies could be designed based on the wealth of existing research linking leader

effectiveness to values. Future research should examine both broad-based and organizationally specific values in order to determine best practices for selection and training. Studies focusing on the degree to which inculcated organizational values also serve as a buffer for work stress need to be conducted.

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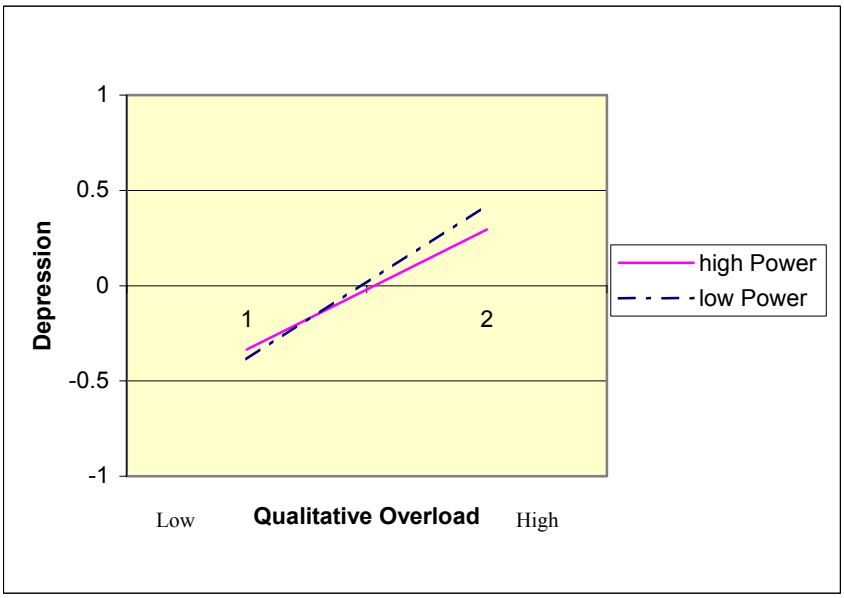
Figure 1a. Power value orientation buffering the qualitative overload-depression linkage



All variables were grand-mean centered (z-transformed)

Figure 1b. Power value orientation buffering quantitative overload-morale linkage.

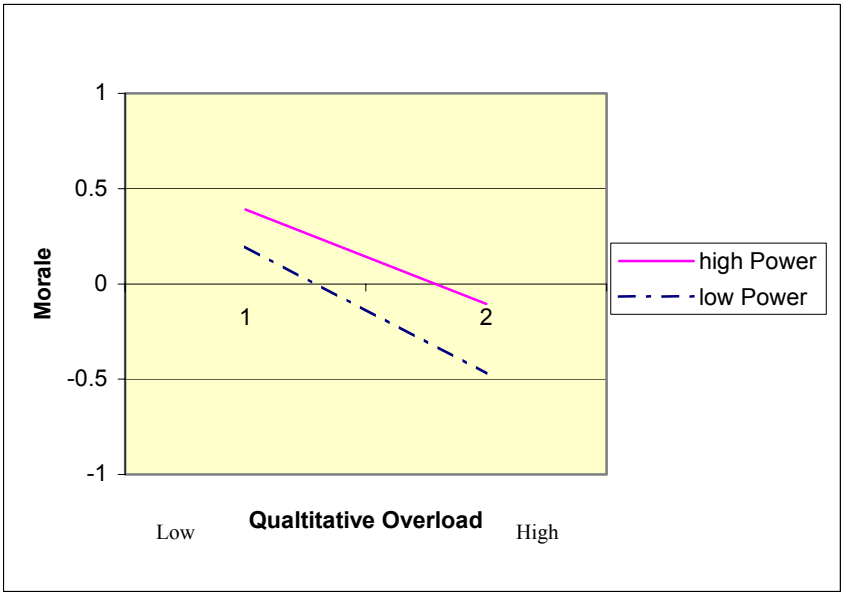


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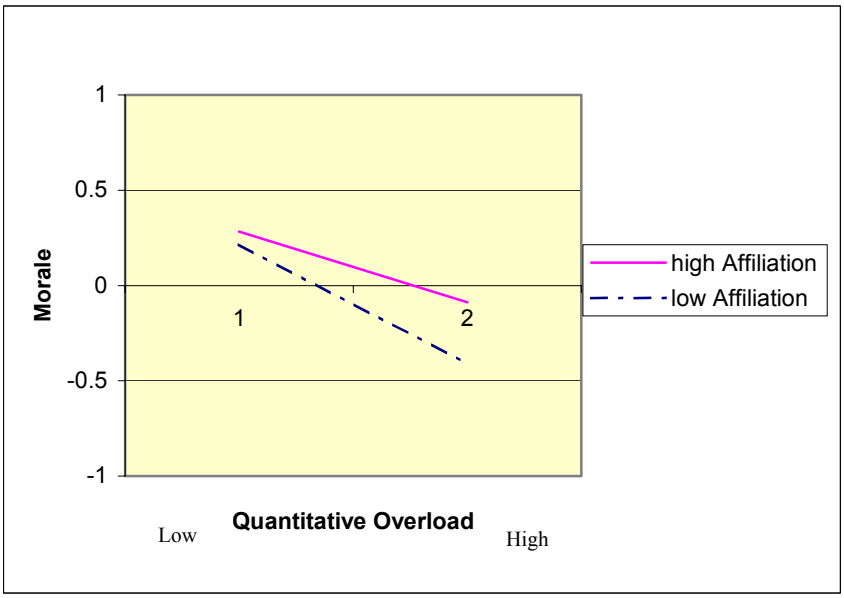
Figure 1c. Affiliation value orientation buffering quantitative overload-morale linkage.



All variables were grand-mean centered (z-transformed)